

POLITICAL SPACE AND CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

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ABSTRACT

**RICHARD ROBERT HARRIS: Political Space and Contemporary Democratic
Citizenship**

(Under the direction of Michael Lienesch)

This thesis begins from the assumption that there are inherent tensions within contemporary democratic citizenship that cause intractable conflicts between citizens over political policies. These conflicts are often caused by a lack of understanding of each other's positions as well as a lack of concern for the common good. The thesis will attempt to defend one central argument: that a rich description of the actual physical political spaces in which political and ethical commitments are formed helps to provide us with both a clearer picture of the limitations and highest potentials of contemporary citizenship. To demonstrate this point, the study critically considers the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Romand Coles, and Jeffrey Stout, describing and evaluating their distinctive conceptions of political space. While the work underlines the importance of examining physical political space when studying citizenship, it also points towards a new, more hopeful vision for democratic citizenship itself.

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I. INTRODUCTION

From Plato to Rousseau to Arendt, there is a strong tradition within political theory of thinkers who believed that the physical spaces where politics happen have a significant impact on the quality of democratic citizenship. In the *Apology* Plato shows how Socrates and other critics of dominant modes of thinking engaged others in informal settings rather than the official public political arenas.¹ Rousseau argues that when a state becomes too expansive that it is impossible for citizens to get together and talk about public policies, and that this will ultimately lead to citizen apathy and the downfall of the state.² Arendt describes the radically democratic spirit of localized political clubs and societies at the time of the American and French revolutions.³ Contemporary theorists, including Sheldon Wolin, David Harvey, and William Connolly, have drawn on this tradition by demonstrating the importance of viewing how democracy works in actual physical spaces in localized contexts to arrive at better theories of democratic citizenship.⁴

This thesis seeks to draw on this tradition of theorizing by considering three contemporary theorists: Alasdair MacIntyre, Jeffrey Stout, and Romand Coles. It will argue that analyzing the physical political spaces in which each of these theorists argue

¹ Plato 1993, 53-57.

² Rousseau 1987, 179-180, 198.

³ Arendt 1990, 236, 240.

⁴ Wolin 2004; Harvey 1990; Connolly 2005.

that democratic citizenship can be formed and sustained will provide a crucial lens through which the limitations and potentialities of contemporary democratic citizenship can be viewed. It will also argue that democratic theory must account for the conditions on the ground that make democratic citizenship possible.

The second chapter will demonstrate how in his *After Virtue* and other writings MacIntyre points to limitations in contemporary citizens' abilities to care for the common good, make their political positions intelligible to themselves and others, and hold each other accountable for their positions, due to the lack of an all-encompassing moral community to serve as political space. It will illuminate this point by exploring examples of communities on the fringes of modern society – including fishing villages, farming communities, and Old-Order Amish communities – which meet MacIntyre's definition of an all-encompassing moral community. It will also explain why MacIntyre believes that the politics of the nation-state and the free market economy make these examples increasingly rare, and show how localized practices in contemporary society fail to fulfill his Aristotelian vision of politics as a complete ordering of goods.

The third chapter will critically analyze Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition* by exploring his hope of resolving the conflict between traditionalists and liberals through more open expression of beliefs by citizens, allowing for mutual recognition. This section will argue that while he provides a hopeful vision, his account of where religious groups form their beliefs is too optimistic. Stout assumes that these groups will form "thick" descriptions of themselves which can be explained coherently within and outside of the group. He notes several possible places where discussions between citizens can occur, including the neutral community spaces of soccer fields and

restaurants and parks. These places, Stout argues, allow ethnically diverse groups to form a common sense of attachment to public spaces – and to each other – in ways that enable the development of a common interest on some issues. His analysis is crucial because it points towards hopeful possibilities for existing public places to serve as political spaces which lead individuals to discussions of common goods. In a review of the spaces, however, this study suggests that while they may be conducive to enhancing civility between groups, the range of issues on which citizens could discover shared goods would be limited in them. Additionally, it argues that Stout’s account of neutral political space does not provide a means for addressing moral conflict on issues not deemed common public goods.

The fourth chapter will consider the radical democratic coalitional political space theorized in the work of Romand Coles. Coles provides an account of physical space in contemporary democracies where some of the limitations to contemporary citizenship exposed by MacIntyre and Stout can be remedied. In his *Beyond Gated Politics*, he argues that divergent constituencies within a city can come together by traveling to each others’ spaces and learning there why others hold the moral and political positions that they hold. He believes that this “world-traveling” will enable citizens to more fully grasp each others’ visions for the city as a whole, thus giving them better resources for developing their own political positions. Additionally, he points to common projects that have resulted from the practice of this theory in the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). Nevertheless, this section also cautions against seeing radical democratic political space as a cure-all. It points to cases where incommensurable moral conflict continues to exist

and admits that participation in a coalition such as the IAF is only possible for citizens who are already part of groups with a public purpose.

Through an analysis of alternate conceptions of political space in these authors, this thesis will provide students of democracy with a glimpse of new, hopeful possibilities for contemporary citizenship under conditions of pluralism while exposing roadblocks for any attempt to realize these possibilities on a mass scale.

II. ALASDAIR MACINTYRE – THE LACK OF AN ALL-ENCOMPASSING MORAL COMMUNITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

While MacIntyre is often viewed by political theorists as simply another (albeit important) contributor to the liberal-communitarian debate of the 1980s and early 1990s, he is rarely seen as someone who poses a serious challenge for those interested in describing the obligations of *democratic* citizenship. This section will sketch reasons for viewing MacIntyre's common goods discourse as democratic, evaluating his argument that this type of discourse is superior to other forms of democratic discourse in contemporary political theory. Then it will proceed to explicate the type of physical spaces in contemporary societies in which MacIntyre believes such discourse is possible, as well as how this account of political space influences our understanding of the limits and potentialities of contemporary democratic citizenship.

"Democracy" is not a word that appears often in the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre. One of his most famous statements is that modernity has created democratized selves which have no necessary social content and no necessary social identity, and which "can then be anything, can assume any role or take any point of view."⁵ MacIntyre does not want political democracy to lead to democratized morality (or moral relativism) in which decisions about policy issues by citizens are arbitrary. And yet, when describing his ideal form of political deliberation, MacIntyre states:

those who hold political office can be put to the question by the citizens and the citizens by

⁵ MacIntyre 1984, 30.

those who hold political office in the course of extended deliberative debate in which there is widespread participation and from which no one from whom something might be learned is excluded. The aim of this deliberative participation is to arrive at a common mind and the formal constitutional procedures of decision-making will be designed to serve this end ... I am not describing something alien to everyday experience. This is a kind of deliberative participation familiar in many local enterprises through which local community is realized.⁶

Clearly, the deliberative element of politics – characteristically seen as crucial in recent democratic theorizing – is central to MacIntyre’s understanding of politics. But does it follow that MacIntyre should be considered as a democratic theorist and thus helpful for the present discussion?

First, it is important to consider what MacIntyre envisions as an ideal form of “politics”. For MacIntyre, politics is the realm of human activity where practices are ordered in such a way that it is clear which goods are most important.⁷ Central to this notion of politics is the idea that “plain” persons within communities can move with ease between theories of the good life developed by their communities and the actual practice of these theories. MacIntyre believes that all plain persons are proto-philosophers who make daily statements about their ethical commitments through the way that they lead their lives in community.⁸ In fact, MacIntyre (taking the Aristotelian view) believes that plain persons asking what the good is for them, in their individual situation and with their history, are led towards asking “What is the good as such for human beings as such?”⁹ The answer of plain persons will depend on how they feel they should lead their life, and this is determined by a variety of sources such as how one was raised, the education that one received, and one’s society. These different sources are Aquinas’s “*inclinationes*”

⁶ MacIntyre 1998b, 248.

⁷ Ibid., 241.

⁸ MacIntyre 1998a, 136.

⁹ Ibid., 137.

that lead people in a “norm-governed direction towards goals which are thereby recognized as goods.”¹⁰ How individuals respond to situations in which their passions tempt them to stray from the good life as their community perceives it will determine how they are progressing towards their ultimate end. They are “in via,” in the sense that life is a progress towards this end. Although there will be numerous different practices that they will pursue, the question becomes how individuals order their pursuit of various ends through those practices.¹¹ “Plain persons” either choose to live as Aristotelians with a view towards a specific telos with rules and virtues to get them there, or they reject this possibility in favor of simply following rules for the sake of following them, or of having no coherent reason why they choose to follow the rules that they do.¹²

MacIntyre’s notion of politics is distinct from other liberal political theories. He believes that liberalism, with its acceptance of any standard as a good standard for moral judgment, has led to an emotivist culture of criterionless moral and political debate. Emotivism is a moral theory that denies that moral judgments are true or false as such. This view sees moral judgments as purely subjective and distinguishes them from scientific “facts”.¹³ This emotivism, which dominates our moral thinking in modern society, rests on the notion that there are not and cannot be “rational justification(s)” for moral arguments, and it therefore does not require historical or sociological explanations of the roots of moral beliefs.¹⁴ Critical to MacIntyre’s notion of the loss that has been

¹⁰ Ibid., 138-9.

¹¹ Ibid., 140-141.

¹² Ibid., 146.

¹³ MacIntyre 1984, 10-11.

¹⁴ Ibid., 18.

experienced through emotivism is that the emotivist self is not identified with any particular “point of view,” becoming instead a “democratized self”.¹⁵ Individuals with fragmented “democratized” identities in our modern culture, people who can change their roles and their views at a whim, appear in stark contrast to MacIntyre’s plain persons, who are able to develop an ordered conception of their ultimate ends, along with the goods that are needed to achieve it.

MacIntyre’s critique of the emotivist culture can also be seen as a warning regarding the types of citizens created by such a culture. Thus he argues that contemporary democratic citizenship is deformed in at least three different ways: citizens act as individuals and do not care for the common good; citizens lack the resources to develop a coherent ordering of goods (thus failing to achieve the highest purpose of politics); and citizens lack accountability structures to hold them to their moral and political commitments.

On a pragmatic level, MacIntyre argues that contemporary citizens fail to consider the common good and thus contribute to the free rider problem. Individuals in contemporary society are less likely to do jobs required for the maintenance of society because people are free to pursue their personal goods. Those who perform services for the common good are necessary for the maintenance of such a society. Yet the logic of liberal democratic society is to create precisely the type of persons who would value their individual goods over such tasks for the common good.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., 30.

¹⁶ MacIntyre 1998b, 242.

The second reason that the interest-based politics created by emotivism fails is because it does not allow individuals to form coherent beliefs about the ordering of goods in their lives. MacIntyre argues that political positions in modern society are incommensurable because they rest on different criteria. For example, an account like Rawls's that focuses on needs and one like Nozick's that focuses on entitlements are incommensurable because they are based on different standards that cannot be weighed against each other. Because they start from the position that individuals have interests prior to society, and that modern society is a cluster of individuals pursuing their own interests, they assume that the best social contract to enter into is one that does not have room for any conception of the history of these positions or how "pursuing shared goods could provide the basis for judgments about virtue and justice."¹⁷ Similarly, MacIntyre argues that the plain person in modern society comes to realize that moral conflict is often not "rationally resolvable."¹⁸ When there are no shared criteria by which individuals can give different weight to different virtues, moral conflict is not resolvable.¹⁹ Thus, liberal democracy fails to achieve the highest end of politics because it encourages individuals to pursue their own self-interested ends instead of learning about the proper ordering of ends within a community.

Both of these pitfalls – the free rider problem and the lack of criteria to rationally resolve differing moral and political positions – are symptoms of a larger fault at the heart of liberal democratic politics – its lack of teleological norms with accountability structures to enforce them. To explain this absence and its importance, MacIntyre

¹⁷ MacIntyre 1984, 233.

¹⁸ MacIntyre 1998a, 146.

¹⁹ Ibid.

proceeds by describing how liberal conceptions of citizenship are correct in their assessment that modern men relate to each other as isolated individuals without a sense of community. Then he describes his alternate vision of political space in which these relationships could be different.

MacIntyre notes in *After Virtue* that seventeenth and eighteenth century enlightenment thinkers routinely saw men as attempting to fulfill their own desires. Therefore, philosophers such as Hume noted that they had to artificially instill a respect for the principles of justice in themselves and others. Because these principles are often not to our immediate interest (rather in the interest of society as a whole), however, MacIntyre questions “why should we find agreeable certain qualities in others which are not useful to us ... and why should we obey rules on occasions when it is not to our interest to do so?”²⁰ Nevertheless, he admits that the “distinguished ancestry” of the “individualistic view” (including Hobbes, Locke, Machiavelli and others) is correct – at least at a surface level – in observing that modern society is a “collection of strangers.”²¹ Rather than relying on traditional communal standards, modern individuals rely on what MacIntyre calls a “cultural *mélange*” of concepts that includes a combination of appeals to entitlements based on desert – which in reality are fragments of an older Christian communal tradition – alongside claims of rights and utility.²² As a result, modern politics has become “civil war carried on by other means.”

It is important to consider the relevance of MacIntyre’s analogy to civil war. Prominent liberal democratic theorists such as Rawls share Hobbes’ fear of civil war

²⁰ MacIntyre 1984, 229.

²¹ Ibid., 250.

²² Ibid., 252.

based on arbitrary, dogmatic perspectives invading the political realm. Rawls and other contemporary liberal thinkers believe that by limiting citizens' use of "comprehensive doctrines," irresolvable discussions that hamper political efficiency and that could lead to all-out warfare can be avoided. Individuals should be obligated to give public reasons that can be accepted by all reasonable persons in the course of a deliberation.²³ What MacIntyre intends to say, by contrast, is precisely that there are no such public reasons that can be given because there are no mutually agreed upon standards to evaluate them. Thus, it is important to see that MacIntyre views current notions of discursive practices (such as that of Rawls) as simply "other means" of arbitrary warfare. Liberal democratic discussion, in other words, is a warfare of ideas that leaves contemporary citizens without justifications for their moral and political positions.

MacIntyre believes that the way for individuals to develop adequate moral and political positions is by pursuing a teleologically ordered existence that is based on an understanding of the purpose of life as a whole. Achieving coherent meaning as ethical and political beings is only possible if an individual has a clear sense of his or her ultimate ends and the actions needed to progress towards those ends. Teleologically ordered individuals see themselves as part of a shared future that gives their actions with respect to others meaning by allowing them "to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed." Man is "essentially a story-telling animal" and it is through stories (for example those found in the bible, fables, mythology)

²³ Rawls 2005, xl-xli.

that individuals discern the purpose of their life and the various ways in which they could – and should – act towards others.²⁴

Not only does a teleologically ordered mode of being give individuals the ability to decide on certain particular actions, but it allows them to place all of their decisions that impact themselves and others in their society – political decisions – within the context of this ordered existence. For example, MacIntyre contends that for the plain person there will always be claims to the possibility of pursuing wealth, power, and honors. These claims stand in stark opposition to other claims – for example to a life rooted in virtues similar to those in Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*.²⁵ MacIntyre contends that how an individual responds to the pull of either of these sets of claims will influence the responsibilities they feel towards others in their society – and thus, I would argue, their justifications for public political choices. In his article, “Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy,” MacIntyre argues that judging the intelligibility of claims is possible both by inquiring what a person’s ultimate good (telos) is, and whether that person had the qualities necessary to perform actions towards others that advances them towards this telos.²⁶

For MacIntyre, however, individuals do not learn the stories that texture their understanding of their ultimate ends and their responsibility towards others in a vacuum. Moreover, they do not shoulder sole responsibility for living out their lives according to their telos. Rather, they learn these lessons through a specific type of *political space*

²⁴ MacIntyre 1984, 216.

²⁵ MacIntyre 1998a, 149.

²⁶ Ibid., 141.

(political, for MacIntyre, in the Aristotelian sense of an ordering of goods²⁷), a moral community capable of educating individuals about the nature of the good life and the proper ordering of their own. It is this moral community that will lead them towards proper ends as well as hold them accountable for their actions. Thus it is here that a teleologically ordered existence becomes possible. The requirement of accountability is necessary because story-telling animals, for MacIntyre, are constantly in need of discerning, with others, which actions their community believes are necessary to achieve the conception of the good that their community values. The moral community serves as a mutual educator – and if necessary corrector – between different individuals throughout their lives.²⁸

Yet MacIntyre argues in *After Virtue* that these all-encompassing moral communities are no longer available to most modern democratic citizens. Entering into public debate commits individuals to many diverse and intractable concepts of justice and rights, so many that it can only lead them to confusion over the proper ordering of goods in their life.²⁹ As a result, communities capable of providing an all-encompassing ends-driven moral tradition are limited to:

some Catholic Irish, some Orthodox Greeks, and some Jews of an Orthodox persuasion, all of them communities that inherit their moral tradition not only through their religion, but also from the structure of the peasant villages and households which their immediate ancestors inhabited on the margins of modern Europe [and] black and white Protestant communities in the United States ... who will recognize in the tradition of the virtues a key part of their own cultural inheritance.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ MacIntyre 1984, 218.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 252.

Yet, even these communities are in danger of losing their monopoly over their members' moral and political allegiances in our contemporary world. Like other contemporary citizens, members of traditional religious groups are often drawn into public discourse. Engaging in public discourse, however, often exposes such citizens to meanings of moral concepts such as "justice" that conflict with the meaning that their religious community gives to those concepts. Outside of the context of their traditional communities, however, these individuals find it difficult to justify why the concepts used by their group should be valued over those of any other. As a result, members of traditional religious communities are often left just as confused about moral concepts as their less traditional counterparts.³¹

In his "Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good," MacIntyre describes the erosion of teleologically oriented communities, spelling out the distinctions between all-encompassing ends-driven communities and the current politics of the nation-state and the functioning of the market. He argues here that all-encompassing moral communities need to be small scale and avoid interventions by the nation-state and disruptions by the market. For the community to have true control over the ordering of goods, those who govern need to be held accountable by those who live in their communities through a deliberative process in which all participate.³² Such accountability, combined with a shared conception of roles and obligations in families, workplaces, and churches, would allow individuals to order – as a community – where each of these goods fits into their own conceptions of the good life. Individuals with immediate access to politicians – who would also be members of these tightly bound moral communities – would have the

³¹ Ibid.

³² MacIntyre 1998b, 248.

ability to hold their leaders (as well as each other) directly to account. As a result, it would be possible for community members to decide how education, workplace requirements, church, and other facets of their lives fit into the whole moral scheme of the community.

MacIntyre allows that such communities also need to be freed from the requirements of the free market. These communities need this freedom because they are dependent on everyone in their community having productive work that can allow them to perform the tasks required of them morally and socially.³³ Societies that aspire to technological advancement and economic development through the market – as do most modern societies – are inherently inimical to this type of existence.³⁴ With the free market it would not be possible for a community to guarantee its members work that would allow them to perform tasks benefiting the community as a whole.

While MacIntyre's "Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good" lends further support to his claim in *After Virtue* that all-encompassing moral communities will not exist in mainstream modern society, it also provides examples of places on the fringes of modern society that come close to this ideal model. MacIntyre argues that societies in which family farms continue to predominate ensure that no one is denied the work that makes them an integral contributor to the common good of their society. Also, he notes that some isolated fishing communities come close to his ideal moral communities.³⁵ It is possible to envision nations at early stages of development – not yet integral players in the world market – where such lives would be possible. MacIntyre makes it clear that

³³ Ibid., 249-250.

³⁴ Ibid., 250.

³⁵ Ibid., 248-250.

what distinguishes these communities from the rest of modern society is the way in which they would have the potential to order all of the actions in an individual's life as opposed to compartmentalizing certain aspects:

the politics of small-scale local community politics cannot be a separate compartmentalized, specialized area of activity, as it is for the politics of advanced modernity. More generally, the forms of compartmentalization characteristic of advanced modernity are inimical to the flourishing of local community. The activities of local communities will indeed be differentiated into different spheres, those of the family, of the workplace and of the parish, for example. But the relationship between the goods of each set of activities is such that in each much the same virtues are required and in each the same vices are all too apt. to be disclosed, so that an individual is not fragmented into her or his separate roles, but is able to succeed or fail in ordering the goods of her or his life into a unified whole and to be judged by others in respect of that success or failure.³⁶

He goes on to provide a detailed analysis of one of these communities – the fishing village. In such a village, the majority of adults are members of a fishing crew, in addition to being members of a family and of a common church. As members of the crew, they have clearly defined roles that allow them to understand how their work in concert with others leads to the success or failure of an expedition. Also, they have a clear understanding of how the success or failure of these expeditions will impact the life of their family and their community. Crew members need to work together to ensure that the catch in the fall and the spring is enough to sustain the entire village throughout the year. Also, they feel a special moral obligation to protect the lives and ensure the health of their companions. This obligation comes from the fact that they recognize that their common struggles as members of the crew are not intended solely for the good of themselves or their own family. Rather, crew members see their lives and the lives of other families in their village as intricately linked, seeing it as their responsibility to ensure mutual prosperity and survival. MacIntyre argues that in such communities the

³⁶ Ibid., 248-249.

goods of crew and household are ordered above all other goods, and the members of the village work together to achieve excellence in each of these:

Consider ... the crews of a fishing fleet ... The range of uses of 'good' and cognate expressions will be intelligible in terms of the structures of activity of the crew and the household. To be good at this or that aspect of the tasks of fishing requires skills whose utility depend on qualities of character and mind in those who use them, qualities which generally and characteristically enable their possessor, by doing what is required of them on the right occasions, to achieve the goods of both crew and household, for the sake of which all else is done.³⁷

While in the contemporary world these communities would be more likely to exist in less developed nations, there are certain religious groups in the United States not mentioned by MacIntyre which seem to function as all-encompassing moral communities in much the same way as the fishing communities that he describes. One example is the Old Order Amish. Although MacIntyre argues in *After Virtue* that religious groups which provide a coherent ordering of goods for their members have failed to retain a monopoly on their members' moral allegiances because of their need to participate in the outside world, the Amish to a large extent break this mold. Like the fishing community that he described, the Amish believe that each member of their community should work to support the community as a whole. The Amish also have a structured religious life that helps to provide a basis for understanding how each of the elements of their lives fit together. Unlike the fishing community, which may exist out of necessity, the Amish community represents a distinctive choice to live an ordered life set apart from the pluralistic reality of the rest of society.

While there are examples of all-encompassing moral communities in the modern world, they are limited in nature and not available to the vast majority of contemporary democratic citizens. Those that do exist are better viewed as thought experiments for

³⁷ MacIntyre 1998c, 273-274.

those who have to deal with the requirements of citizenship in modern pluralistic market-oriented societies. All-encompassing moral communities would not experience the free rider problem because there would be clearly defined roles for all in every aspect of their life. Thinking about common goods would be simple because each individual would have a clear understanding of how the work that they do is connected to the education that their children receive, as well as to their familial obligations. All of these practices would be driven by a clear, mutually understood notion of the purpose of their common existence – often formed through a common church life. Thus the problem of the intelligibility of one’s standards – both in one’s own mind and when explaining one’s actions and beliefs to others – would no longer be an issue. For MacIntyre, this vision is radically distinct from the fragmented way in which most modern individuals make decisions about their children’s education, the type of work they perform (and the meaning of that work), the church they go to, the organizations they join – all without a conception of how these activities work together to form a coherent moral vision. Contemporary liberal democratic citizenship is thus, in MacIntyre’s eyes, deformed because citizens do not have the resources necessary to form coherent moral positions or the communal structure necessary to make them creatures that care about the common good.³⁸

While this vision is one that must trouble anyone who cares about describing the obligations of contemporary democratic citizenship, it is important to note a ray of hope in MacIntyre’s writings on the subject of political space – his view of certain practices that, while not all-encompassing, provide individuals with some teleologically oriented

³⁸ MacIntyre 1998b, 248.

education. These practices, which exist in a “variety of local social contexts” include “family and household life ... schools ... neighborhoods ... parishes ... certain workplaces.” MacIntyre believes that these contexts provide individuals with the possibility of asking teleologically oriented questions such as how their good relates to the good of others involved in the enterprise and what the overall good of the enterprise is.³⁹ Even so, MacIntyre argues that the society created by the politics of the nation-state compartmentalizes these practices and thus fails to allow individuals to see their work, their family life, and their religious commitments as parts of an ordered whole:

This type of shared understanding is one familiar to most of us in a variety of local social contexts ... in which immediate decision-making has to presuppose rationally justifiable answers to such questions as ‘How does my good relate to the good to be achieved through this enterprise?’ and ‘How does the good to be achieved through this enterprise relate to the other goods of my and their lives?’ Where that understanding is absent, is indeed excluded, is in the activities that have come to be labeled ‘politics’ in the contemporary meaning of the term. So paradoxically the life of so-called politics is now one from which the possibility of rational political justification is excluded ... the politics of small-scale local community politics cannot be a separate compartmentalized, specialized area of activity, as it is for the politics of advanced modernity.⁴⁰

In short, MacIntyre believes that his Aristotelian notion of politics as the activity that orders all other practices is not possible in modern nation-states, since these states fail to provide their members with the political space – an all-encompassing moral community – in which such moral structure is possible.

Given the reality of pluralism and the lack of all-encompassing moral communities in contemporary society, it is prudent to look elsewhere for a more hopeful view of how to deal with some of the deficiencies that MacIntyre sees with respect to contemporary democratic citizenship. On the one hand, the comparative disadvantages of incommensurable – and thus rationally indefensible – moral and political positions

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

should cause us to advocate for resources that allow individuals as much ability to order goods in their lives as possible. On the other hand, MacIntyre's notion of certain localized practices that are teleologically oriented should give us some hope that through these practices (and perhaps a more expansive list of practices) individuals can learn to view their lives in more coherent, ends-driven ways.

III. JEFFREY STOUT – THE DISCURSIVE DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

Jeffery Stout's latest book, *Democracy and Tradition*, is a bold attempt to forge a middle ground between (on the one hand) what he calls the "New Traditionalism" of Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, and Richard Rorty and (on the other) the secular liberalism of John Rawls. He argues that:

The religious dimensions of our political culture are typically discussed at such a high level of abstraction that only two positions become visible: an authoritarian form of traditionalism and an antireligious form of liberalism.⁴¹

While Stout believes that both traditionalist and liberal attempts to paint "cultural warfare" as the reality of our times are overstated, "caricatures" on both sides will "become true" if enough people continue to believe them.⁴² Additionally, the media and powerful economic interests connected to particularistic enclaves (both religious and secular) seek to exacerbate these conflicts. In response, Stout advocates a discursive democratic practice - conversation - to allow people to express their own views on their own terms (e.g., by incorporating religious reasons) and to open them to critique from others.⁴³ This dialectical, socially cooperative process is rooted in a Hegelian belief in

⁴¹ Stout 2004, 10.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 10-11.

mutual respect as the highest aim of politics,⁴⁴ and thus acknowledges the role that both traditions and liberal virtues play in shaping the highest ideals of democratic citizens.⁴⁵

Stout's argument is important for contemporary democratic theory and practice because it attempts to forge common ground between those whose identities are deeply shaped by "comprehensive doctrines" (e.g., religious traditions that do not condone compromise with the rest of society) and those who wish to exclude these doctrines from the public sphere at all cost. In many ways, Stout sees this as *the* major problem confronting democratic theory today. Stout is deeply concerned with creating the conditions for democratic citizenship that overcome the limitations of what he considers to be a cultural impasse between secular liberals, those on the religious right, "diasporic communities" with their "ideology of multiculturalism", and the business elite – all of whom have their own interests that they seek to claim over and above the needs of the "civic community" as a whole.⁴⁶ As a result, he takes issue with liberal theorists such as Rawls who argue, "that reasoning on important political questions must ultimately be based on principles that no reasonable citizen could reasonably reject."⁴⁷ Instead, he argues for a discursive democratic practice that will illicit the real reasons why individuals hold the moral and political views that they hold while avoiding "caricatures" that limit what citizens can learn from and about one another.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 292-295.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Stout begins by arguing that the highest aim of democratic politics, realized through deliberation with other citizens, is mutual recognition.⁴⁹ Recognition is achieved through the democratic experience of understanding one's own narrative and revealing it to others in the most real way possible.⁵⁰ Since differently situated selves can reasonably disagree, context must be considered before there can be "substantive respect." Says Stout, it is important to take "all of the situational particulars into account" before declaring a "rationality deficit."⁵¹

Within democratic discourse substantive respect is fostered when one keeps track of the normative commitments of others, discerning which views they may be entitled to from their point of view and with their particular collateral commitments.⁵² Judging whether others are entitled to a view may be difficult, because people become committed to various norms for wildly different reasons. Religious reasons, for example, may be the deciding factor on a variety of moral and political issues for some persons while they may have no influence on other's views.⁵³ Although diversity of commitments can lead to impasses in the course of a conversation, everyone must be entitled to their beliefs as long as they explain in detail the context in which these beliefs are forged. Doing so allows one to critique others on their own terms – for example by arguing that a particular policy or course of action is actually compatible (or incompatible) with the religious

⁴⁹ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁵¹ Ibid., 77.

⁵² Ibid., 210-11.

⁵³ Ibid., 198.

framework in which they operate.⁵⁴ Frank statements of religious reasons for political-ethical stances, while they may temporarily be “conversation stoppers,”⁵⁵ lead to the realization that difficult disagreements are often “a conflict or balance of rational considerations, not an absence of such considerations.”⁵⁶

While this commitment to discourse based on mutual recognition seems potentially fruitful, it is not clear where such “reflective self-understanding”⁵⁷ would take place. Stout argues that it is necessary for religious groups to determine what their “ethically relevant commitments” are within the group so that they can then be expressed to the outside world. This task – mainly carried out by “public theologians” – is both to clarify for the believers what their religious commitments are and to make these commitments clear to the outside world to avoid caricatures.⁵⁸

But while Stout believes that individuals need to clearly express their religious commitments, it is not clear how they are to do so simply by engaging in self-reflection based on the work of public theologians. Given the plethora of sources from which individuals can form their ethical commitments, it is unclear (as MacIntyre argued) why they should not become radically confused about their own religious commitments and how they relate to those of others in their society. Specifically, it is not clear how they will be capable of ordering all or most of the commitments of their lives in ways that can be rationally understood both by themselves and by other citizens.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 234.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 276.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 112

These types of questions are not raised by Stout, who seems to assume for the most part that those with religious commitments will simply “have” those commitments. What he misses is the distinction between holding religious or other commitments and being part of a teleologically oriented practice – such as active participation in the life of a church itself. MacIntyre felt that such participation was crucial, because it gave one at least a basic education into how to order the goods in one’s life with respect to others and how to feel a sense of common commitment towards an end.⁵⁹ Stout, however, does not provide a rich description of the constitution of political spaces where individuals form their political commitments. Although he admits that different individuals will have different levels of attachment to religious or other commitments, he fails to consider that this may be due to the alternate places in which they form these commitments.

Admittedly, Stout does present a tantalizing vision of how democratic citizens learn from each other through discourse – and he does not feel that this should be limited to any one place. “The discursive exchange essential to democracy,” he argues “is likely to thrive only where individuals identify to some significant extent with a community of reason-givers.”⁶⁰ Importantly, he sees pluralism as compatible with his vision of democratic individualism, where citizens “talk things through with citizens unlike themselves.”⁶¹ He argues that there is no need to limit one’s “discursive community” to those who share one’s most deeply held beliefs, but rather to talk things through with citizens who have different conceptions of “ultimate concerns.”⁶² Of concern for Stout is

⁵⁹ MacIntyre 1998a, 248.

⁶⁰ Stout 2004, 293.

⁶¹ Ibid., 297.

⁶² Ibid., 298-299.

the fact that those in the religious right, as well as the poor and diaspora communities “who would benefit most directly from democratic social change” are “unwilling to identify with a cause greater than their own.”⁶³ Nevertheless, he calls on democrats to engage in discourse everywhere:

the public ... is not a place. In a modern democracy, (addressing other citizens) is not something one does in one place or all at once. Wherever two or three citizens are gathered whom one might address as citizens, as persons jointly responsible for the common good, one is in a potentially public setting.⁶⁴

Still, it is instructive to consider Stout’s vision of where such inter-communal discourse might take place at the local level. He argues that this can occur, in a seemingly ad hoc fashion, in diverse communities such as Ithaca, New York, where he lives. Geographies which are seen as providing the space for such discourse include a number of neutral, publicly owned spaces that are shared in common, from sports fields to crafts shows at community centers to other places where there are “social practices” that cause people to reach beyond their base self interest towards social cooperation and engagement.

One example of a place where people have begun to come together across ethnic lines and a variety of other differences are on the sports fields in Stout’s community. He says that soccer fields have done much to bring those of a variety of different ethnic communities together around a common activity that they all share. Soccer was brought to his community by the Italians, but it was picked up on by African American and Anglo children about the same time that Latin Americans began to join the community.

⁶³ Ibid., 293-294.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 113.

Sometimes teams are divided on ethnic lines, sometimes they are mixed, but in each case the activity is important to all involved and it has begun to bring people together:

One way of viewing this book is as an answer to the question of what my neighbors and I hold in common. We share activities ... not long after Latinos began to join a soccer club founded back in the 1970s by suburban whites, a boys team called the Latin Power offered membership to a handful of Anglos. Not long after, the high school boys won the state championship with a team that included Latino, African-American, Anglo, and Asian members. We all understood what community those teams represented ... what we have going for us as a community, are valued social practices and the forms of excellence they involve.⁶⁵

These types of activities have helped to bring individuals together in ways that at least allow them the possibility of talking together about the needs of their community. Individuals drawn together by soccer matches or restaurants that all like to share, sometimes allow their conversations to drift beyond discussions of “center forwards, anchovies” to “school board candidates.”⁶⁶ Stout argues that in these situations individuals have begun to hold each other to account for their “commitments and actions, so we talk about them.”⁶⁷ A community identity has developed that leads individuals to talk about collective concerns such as a large hospital that threatens to encroach on an area which can unite people of different races and social classes in opposition:

Those of us who have voted at least once have begun to feel that we need not quake or bow in the presence of school superintendents, hospital executives, or other members of the professional class. Because of all this, we are able to sense personally and say publicly what the hospital threatens to take away from us if it clumsily destroys the Italian neighborhood that links our little community together.⁶⁸

In this way, the communal bonds that are forged on soccer fields and in restaurants have the potential to carry over into a common concern for protecting the public spaces in which all learn and play. Stout’s account presents an important view of how people in

⁶⁵ Ibid., 301-302.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 302

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

his community have begun to come together around common practices that they all see as valuable and are even beginning to develop a shared understanding of their interests on certain public political problems which enables them to address these issues as a community.

The type of socially cooperative practices that Stout mentions are important for building relationships, and they certainly qualify in the MacIntyrian sense of what it means to have a teleologically oriented activity that teaches one about common goods. But, it can be argued that these practices rarely rise to the level of being political in the Aristotelian sense, because they fail to give individuals the resources to decide how to order their political commitments in light of the diversity of experiences and opinions in their community. While occasionally there may be a project that unites everyone in action, for the most part the spaces of social cooperation that Stout theorizes are neutral ground, free from the kind of risky encounters with others that will be central to the conception of political space theorized by Coles. It is unclear whether the neutral political space theorized by Stout allows individuals to reach common understandings on more contentious issues that might not be seen by all groups as part of the broader public interest.

In short, the neutral political spaces that Stout theorizes – while they may help to solve the free rider problem by giving everyone a stake in at least part of the community – would be unlikely to solve the problem of incommensurable moral positions that MacIntyre presents. MacIntyre's ideal vision of space was limited to communities on the fringes of modern society precisely because it is only in these communities that individuals can come to understand their work, their education, their family, and their

church as elements of their social life with others which work together to form a coherent whole. While individuals coming together in soccer fields and restaurants would certainly share some common goods, it is unclear how they could hold each other to account for refusing to work or educate their children (either intellectually or morally). It is also not clear how they could reconcile divergent moral positions such as abortion and gay marriage, which could be impacting the daily lives of those in their communities. In sum, the limitations that MacIntyre points to as a result of the lack of all-encompassing moral communities seem, for the most part, to be confirmed rather than corrected by the account of political space given by Stout.

IV. ROMAND COLES – RADICAL DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL SPACE

This section will explore the alternate vision of political space in the work of Romand Coles, especially in his most recent book *Beyond Gated Politics*. It will begin by explicating Coles' account of the political spaces in which individuals form their moral and political commitments, as well as how radical democratic coalition building transforms this notion of space. Then, using the insights gleaned from MacIntyre and Stout, this section will explore how this account of political space responds to some of the deficiencies in contemporary democratic citizenship that result from the lack of all-encompassing moral communities. Coles's vision of political space relies on the notion that the pluralistic reality of contemporary society requires individuals to learn the social and moral convictions of others by meeting them where they are – in their own spaces where their convictions are most deeply formed. At its best, it has the potential – through mutual experiential learning – to give individuals the resources to exercise a form of Aristotelian ordering of goods which uses conditions of pluralism in contemporary society to its advantage by allowing citizens to make considered judgments after understanding how they must live with others. While issues of translatability of competing moral and political perspectives remain, it will be argued that even on the most difficult issues there is the potential to develop a tragic sensibility that can lead to the kind of respect necessary for a politics of common goods.

On some fronts, challenges remain which will continue to haunt Coles' project. On the issue of accountability – a central feature of the moral community MacIntyre

envisions – there is a deficiency in Coles’s radical democratic account of politics that is not easily resolved. Paradoxically, this deficiency ultimately will provide us with a further insight into contemporary democratic citizenship – that while contemporary citizens can achieve a quasi-Aristotelian ordering of the goods in their lives through ad hoc local level coalition building, there is a large element of personal responsibility that is required to achieve this ordering. Yet given the breakdown of traditional communal structures (which MacIntyre noted) there is little reason to believe that a radical democratic coalition built on traveling to different spaces in the community would be less effective in providing people with the resources to order their lives than traditional organizations. Besides, it has the comparative advantage of giving them more resources with which to make political decisions.

Coles’s account is also deeply informed by MacIntyre’s notion that it is in teleologically-oriented practices that individuals can begin to think in terms of common goods. As will be shown, those individuals most capable of participating in Coles’s radical democratic coalitions are those who were already part of groups with a clearly defined set of ends. Thus, his account will ultimately limit which citizens have the resources available to allow them to join radical democratic coalitions in the first place. Nevertheless, like MacIntyre’s account of space, exploring these limitations will provide us with an understanding of the problems inherent in contemporary citizenship as well as a vision for a better way forward.

Viewing localized interactions through the lens of radical democratic political space will also elucidate how the public discursive practice that Stout theorizes might be enriched. Rather than assuming that citizens from diverse constituencies can only discuss

political matters in neutral political spaces, Coles advocates risky encounters which may involve traveling to places in one's city where one is less comfortable for the purpose of learning from others:

The abysses between people located very differently just minutes apart in urban areas today are often so deep that the idea that we are likely to hear one another well simply by communicating in a relatively neutral place – across whatever table located wherever between us – greatly obscures and possibly undermines the task at hand. It is very easy, when the other is speaking from a place – or places – one has neither inhabited nor experienced them inhabiting, to shed inadvertently all too many of their words, expressions, and gestures; to fail to absorb their depth, register their weight, and taste them; or to dismiss them altogether. This is, I think, the common course of things far more than we usually acknowledge.⁶⁹

Describing the vast gulf between citizens who rarely encounter the physical spaces in which others in their city learn and pray and laugh and cry, Coles argues for an alternate model of political space in which they can experience these places.

Coles argues that individuals situate themselves politically and morally in terms of the public personas that they represent in their everyday lives, whether in their work or in the types of organizations that make up the fabric of their lives (for example being a “social worker, pastor, imam, teacher, union member”). The “political passions and perceptions that we so often hide from strangers” are all that we – or they – usually have to draw on in forming political judgments about our role with respect to ourselves and the organizations that mean the most to us, as well as our roles with respect to others in our society who we may not understand.⁷⁰ In these traditional political spaces, individuals may be part of “religious congregations, neighborhood associations ... social movements, community centers, unions, PTAs ...”, but they lack the “basic condition of democratic possibility” which is “experience ... that can carry us into the lives and depths of

⁶⁹ Coles 2005, 223.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 220-221.

others.”⁷¹ We live in the midst of “gated geographies” that restrict our ability to understand others and thus limit our ability to listen to what they may have to teach us about the communities in which we live.⁷²

Particularly problematic for Coles is the fact that the “unreflective blindness” to other’s perceptions about their lives in our community means that heated issues will often get resolved by allowing the most economically and politically powerful interests to win out.⁷³ This double concern – for the arbitrariness with which political decisions are made, and thus for the ways in which they are susceptible to power – bares striking resemblance to that of MacIntyre. Just as MacIntyre felt that the liberal democratic tradition from Hobbes and Locke to Rawls had effectively described the reality of the individual, Coles sees that those living in contemporary democracies typically exist as a constellation of strangers. And like MacIntyre and Stout, Coles recognizes that individuals make their decisions about their political positions and their obligations to others in their community based on arbitrary prejudices forced upon them by powerful interests (for MacIntyre it was the state and the market and for Stout it was powerful media and economic interests that control particularistic enclaves). On the current deficiencies in citizenship with respect to achieving the common good, as well as the implications for the arbitrary ways in which most citizens make their political judgments, MacIntyre, Stout, and Coles are all in fairly close concord.

Coles, however, sees a hopeful vision for democratic citizenship in radical democratic coalition building, using the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) as his model.

⁷¹ Ibid., 215, 225.

⁷² Ibid., 223.

⁷³ Ibid., xv.

This vision of a radically democratic political space suggests that the way out of the current limitations to democratic citizenship is to give individuals the resources to form their political positions through direct interaction with each other. The IAF is an “organization of organizations” which enables people from a variety of groups to come together and share their group’s vision of the community with others.⁷⁴ The process of coming together usually involves each congregation or association meeting within their own group to discuss their particular vision for the city, as well as the political issues that they believe are most important to take up at this time.⁷⁵ This process is then followed by meeting together with members of other groups in “various neighborhoods and institutions of an urban area.”⁷⁶ For Coles, these meetings are the essence of radically democratic space. His vision consists of traveling to unfamiliar locations in a community where one can practice listening to and learning from others by experiencing them in their particular space, thus gaining the resources to form a “critical vision” of the community together.⁷⁷

Why is this movement around the community – what Coles calls “world-traveling” – important for improving the resources available to individuals as citizens for making political decisions about their community? Coles believes that “world-traveling” is crucial because of the pluralistic reality in which contemporary citizenship takes place:

The world as it is and the world as it should be are not raw facts or simple objective realities. We don’t have objective uninterrupted access to either world. People from different histories see the two worlds differently ... What you and I can create for our respective groups ... and the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 215, 220-221.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 222.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 225.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 222.

larger community depends on bringing our respective interpretations together in a better reading of our common situation and obligations than we could do alone.⁷⁸

Contemporary democratic citizenship exists in a world in which there is no all-encompassing conception of the good. The problems of incommensurability that would result from the lack of such communities will only be solved by a “better reading” of each others’ situation. And this reading is precisely what traveling to different spaces in a community can do for citizens – it can help them realize what forces actually influence the political outlook of others in their city.⁷⁹ “World-traveling” involves looking at the conditions of the houses in neighborhoods where we may not normally walk, going to churches that we might not usually attend, and gaining a new perspective on why someone holds the beliefs that they hold and why they are who they are morally and politically.⁸⁰ Achieving this new perspective is possible because individuals can listen better to others whose stories they can begin to understand. It will be possible to develop a “relational sense of their interests” which can transform individuals in the way that they understand their obligations towards others – increasing their “*democratic imagination*.” While the group of people involved in this practice may remain constant from time to time, moving to different geographic locations allows individuals and groups to tell their stories on their own terms, debunking prejudices and giving everyone else access to their stories.⁸¹

In addition to these ways in which citizens’ perceptions of one another are transformed, there are many examples of how the IAF has drawn people into cooperative

⁷⁸ Coles 2006, 551.

⁷⁹ Coles 2005, 222.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 225.

⁸¹ Ibid., 232.

efforts to care for often forgotten constituencies within their cities. After discerning common visions for the wider community (and learning from others about issues of importance to those that one does not usually communicate with), a variety of tangible campaigns have been launched around the United States. These have dealt with “winning significant gains around housing, living wages, education, equitable infrastructure, safe neighborhoods, environmental justice (and others).”⁸² Although these projects are secondary in Coles’ mind to the initial work of forming new relationships that transform citizen perceptions of others in their city, they do help us understand how issues such as MacIntyre’s free rider problem can be resolved through creating ad hoc radical democratic coalitions.⁸³

At this point it is possible to speculate on how Coles’s conception of political space suggests potential resources to develop more of an Aristotelian ordering of goods for each citizen, providing a potential solution to the problem of common goods and the lack of a rational basis for one’s political position that can be explained to others. While individuals may enter a coalition like the IAF with particular commitments – the particular moral vision of their church, the principles of true equality and rights for women in a woman’s rights organization, or to the desires for equal citizenship for those in Hispanic community centers – by learning each other’s reasons for being committed to these goals, individuals may find ways of working together that they could not have imagined. For example, while there may be intense disagreement over certain issues such as abortion or gay marriage, groups may find common ground on issues such as domestic violence and preventing violence based on sexual orientation. In Nashville,

⁸² Coles 2006, 552.

⁸³ Ibid., 551-2.

Tennessee, for example, individuals in an IAF came together around a common belief that security was a major concern for many in their community. They began to fix abandoned houses, lobby for stronger measures in their community against drug dealers, and work to prevent violence against gays and lesbians. In Durham, North Carolina, those in the Hispanic community noted how domestic violence was a major concern in their community. The IAF in Durham was able to help those dealing with domestic violence and to attempt to enact measures at the city-wide level to help prevent domestic violence in the future.⁸⁴

While IAF coalitions have won important victories on behalf of a variety of groups, Coles argues that the more important purpose of these coalitions is to force individuals to consider the relationship of their lives to those of others in their city.⁸⁵ He argues that:

The redistributive track record of the IAF is substantial in this regard ... including resources for the construction of thousands of houses enabling home ownership for low income people, many urban living wage ordinances, a raise in the California minimum wage, and hundreds of millions of dollars of city and state funds directed toward poor and working class schools, neighborhoods, and communities. Yet these issues and *ultimately even the game of interest group liberalism as such* are *secondary* objectives – the *secondary game* – for the best IAF organizations. A key factor in discerning which issues to pursue – as well as how to pursue them, when to compromise, etc. – is the extent to which they might contribute to broadening and deepening durable radical democratic engagement, relational power, knowledge, and practices (the *primary goal*).⁸⁶

Maintaining his commitment to tangible political objectives, Coles acknowledges that the most important part of IAF coalitions is how they transform the ways in which citizens think about their interests. Rather than acting on purely selfish motivations, radical democratic political spaces force citizens to develop a relational sense of their interests

⁸⁴ Coles 2005, 223.

⁸⁵ Coles 2006, 552.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

through “cultivating a power for democracy and justice that grows precisely in and through its capacity to listen.”⁸⁷

Despite this, issues would remain irresolvable. While incommensurable moral positions cannot be fully resolved under conditions of pluralism, Coles argues that there is at least the comparative advantage of better mutual understanding through engagement with fundamentally opposed positions in radical democratic coalitional political space. He cites the example *Mozert v. Hawkins County*, where the plaintiffs argued that a public school textbook endorsed tolerance of perspectives that they felt the Bible condemned.⁸⁸ Coles argues that similar types of conflicts at the community level could be dealt with through radical democratic politics in a way that would at least broaden respect for each other’s alternate world views.⁸⁹ While Coles admits that in cases of difficult differences all possible conflicts will not be eliminated, he insists that individuals will at least achieve a better understanding of the issues at stake.⁹⁰

Whether it is possible to achieve complete reconciliation of differences through the politics of radical democracy, it is at least clear at this point that more resources are potentially available through the alternate conception of political space conceived by Coles. Two problems raised by MacIntyre’s vision of political space that still linger, however, are the issue of accountability and the fact that, even in Coles’ vision, individuals need to be part of teleologically-oriented groups (whether they be churches,

⁸⁷ Coles 2005, 223.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 242-243.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 257.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 254.

women's rights organizations, etc.) before they can join the radical democratic coalitions that he advocates.

The first issue of accountability helps to demonstrate a challenge that will constantly be faced by contemporary citizens given the pluralistic reality of modern society. MacIntyre appears to be correct here, at least to some extent. It is true that there is no all-encompassing moral community that will be completely in line with one's goals in life and one's ultimate conception of the purpose of one's life. Therefore, it will not be simple for others to hold one accountable for failing to adhere to one's moral commitments – or even for joining and participating in a coalition like the IAF in the first place. The contemporary world is a world that demands personal responsibility for one's own citizenship. Nevertheless, individuals who are inspired by Coles's vision of radical democracy can take heart that there are spaces available where the pluralistic reality of contemporary society can actually work to teach citizens more about themselves and their responsibility towards their community than would have been possible in organizations where they might feel more at home.

A potentially greater problem is derived from the very point where Coles's concept of political space intersects with MacIntyre's – their shared belief that being part of some teleologically oriented organization is necessary to give one a sense of the common good and to order one's political beliefs in light of interactions with others. The problem that this shared vision demonstrates is that only those who are already committed to some organization with a defined conception of the good (however incomplete from MacIntyre's standpoint) can participate in radical democratic politics. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that only those organizations that recognize their

limitations and seek to engage in common dialogue with others will be predisposed to be part of radically democratic organizations.

The examination of political space in MacIntyre, Stout, and Coles has shown that potential problems that exist for contemporary individuals seeking to exercise their democratic citizenship. While radical democratic political space helps to solve some of these problems, it also points to the fact that overcoming the pitfalls of lack of commensurable political positions and respect for the common good will be hard work. Coles realized as much when he discussed the issue of dealing with difficult differences like those exposed in the *Hawkins County* case. He admits that, “there are also dangers that a politics focused on common goods poses for radical democratic promises of a more mobile and receptive table of engagement.”⁹¹ Some of these dangers are that participants in radical democratic coalitions will try “shying away” from the most “volatile differences” such as sexuality, animal rights, and other issues.⁹² Nevertheless, he believes that on balance it is better to try and bring citizens from a variety of constituencies together to attempt to achieve mutual understanding and to promote learning from one another:

These tensions are with us to stay, because what is dangerous is also very important and valuable to what it endangers. By turning our eyes and our ears toward these tensions, by being attentive to the overlapping but also agonistic values and practices of democratic politics, and by resisting the temptation to reduce democratic politics in the name of one set of concerns, we might cultivate a judgment more capable of democratic empowerment.⁹³

⁹¹ Ibid., 236.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 237.

V. CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that attention to the physical political spaces in which citizens develop their sense of ethical and political commitments provides us with a basis for understanding the limitations and potentialities of contemporary democratic citizenship. While MacIntyre's vision of the all-encompassing moral community is not possible in many places – if at all – under conditions of modern pluralism, it is a vision that gives us a unique vantage point from which to view the limitations of modern democratic citizenship. The problem of incommensurability between diverse moral positions which restricts democratic citizen's abilities to engage with each other in political debate will always haunt our notion of democratic citizenship. Failing to find reasons, solely on the basis of individualism, for democratic citizens to care about the common political goods in their society should be equally troubling.

While Stout provides a hopeful account of using discursive democratic practice – conversation – to help contemporary citizens better understand each other and form community together, his account of political space limits his ability to respond to several of MacIntyre's charges about the limitations of contemporary citizenship. First, his account of where individuals who were part of churches would form their political commitments is not clear. While he mentions the role of “public theologians” in providing members of the church and outsiders with the resources to understand the ethical commitments of the church, he does not respond to MacIntyre's contention that individuals will be presented with so many resources in the public sphere that they would

have no obvious reasons to listen to their church. Additionally, the social practices where he believes that diverse constituencies within the community could come together do not rise to the level of “political” spaces in the Aristotelian sense, thus leaving him open to the critique that a chaotic condition of incommensurability between positions – civil war carried on by other means – would be likely to still exist.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Stout’s account does not seem unreasonable. In fact, it seems very similar to the social reality experienced in everyday life. And this is not by accident. Stout admits that his goal was to draw upon the “political culture” already existing in which there is a “widespread and steady commitment, on the part of citizens, to talk things through with citizens unlike themselves.”⁹⁴ The political limitations on the social practices that Stout describes could derive from the fact that there are actually very few spaces where individuals can come together and learn from one another in contemporary societies.

On the other hand, Coles’ conception of radically democratic coalitional political space gives us a different vision – a vision of hope for overcoming some of these limitations by embracing the pluralistic world in which we live. Through bringing diverse individuals together and helping them to better understand the social experience of others in their community, individuals at the very least will come to understand what it means to think in terms of common goods. While they may not come to completely understand each other’s reasons for adopting certain positions, there is a much better chance that they can achieve the mutual understanding that Stout desired in a radical democratic coalition. By committing them to listening to others and traveling to other

⁹⁴ Ibid., 297

spaces in the community, Coles's coalitions allow citizens an opportunity to understand others' political visions and the social realities that texture them.

Taken together, these thinkers offer important insights about the starkest limitations and highest potentials of contemporary democratic citizenship. While those potentials may not be immediately realizable, they give us a vision of what democracy can and ought to be.

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